

Planning Board unanimously approves Lake Frank trail

Issue has split Derwood community

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A 10-foot-wide trail leading to Olney will be constructed along Lake Frank in Derwood, putting to rest a year-long dispute that has pitted neighbors against each other and against county and state officials.

The Montgomery County Planning Board unanimously approved the project Thursday night. The detailed design will be completed and the project put out for construction bids next spring, with the trail scheduled for completion by early 2012, according to the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission.

For residents like Richard Parsons of Avery Road and others who live in close proximity to the lake but cannot easily access it, the decision came as a triumph.

Parsons said it did not make sense that his family could bike to Mount Vernon using the Rock Creek Trail system, but that they have to drive to Lake Frank, which is less than a mile from their home.

"You've got to keep a perspective on the positive," Parsons said. "It's not about a whole handful of people. It's about a network that will improve everyone's access to this whole trail."

But for others, particularly many in the Manor Lake Civic Association that live closest to the lake, the decision came as a crushing defeat reflecting a year's worth of protests, research, failed negotiations and a sense of betrayal by public officials.

Patty Kane, president of the Lake Frank Trail Committee, a resident's group created out of the Manor Lake Civic Association, said the decision to have a connector trail would drastically change the area around Lake Frank, particularly issues of bike and pedestrian safety.

"We're concerned that the whole character of Lake Frank will be changed by having this bike highway," Kane said. "We think that Lake Frank should remain this secluded type of wilderness where people can have that 'westward ho' feeling, where bird watchers can go without having to worry about bikers whizzing by, and a safe place for dog walkers and small children."

Kane said she was upset by people's accusations that her argument against having a connector trail was a "Not in My Back Yard" issue. Kane said there were several residents who lived outside the Manor Lake area who were opposed to the connector trail placement and testified at the meeting.

Kane said she was also upset that the Planning Board did not consider the idea of having a residents' advisory group to work with Park and Planning officials on an agreeable alignment for the connector trail.

The connector trail was part of the county's plan to expand the trail system in Rock Creek Regional Park northward to Olney and the Patuxent River and southward to the Potomac River. The goal was outlined in the 1998 Upper Rock Creek Corridor Plan, a plan to connect 250 miles of paved and unpaved trails throughout the county, and the 1978 Bicycle Masters Plan, according to Park and Planning officials.

Kane said residents around Lake Frank in the late 1990s recommended to Park and Planning officials to remove two abandoned parking lots south of Lake Frank. The parking lots comprised approximately 6.87 acres and were in deteriorating condition, Kane said.

Kane said residents at that time recommended that the area between the parking lots be replaced with a natural-surface trail. Turf and tree plantings were also proposed to be included as buffer along the trail. The state agreed to fund the project in May 2006 as part of environmental efforts to mitigate the impact of the Intercounty Connector, the east-west toll road that will connect Gaithersburg to Laurel, part of which is under construction in Derwood.

Originally, Park and Planning officials had said a connector trail would be built along the spillway of the dam that drained into Lake Frank.

But after holding several public meetings on the matter and further consultation with community members between 2006 and 2007, Park and Planning officials said they discovered that removing the parking lots would not have much of an environmental impact on the area.

Park and Planning officials also said more people preferred to have a connector trail along Lake Frank and that the Maryland Department of the Environment's Dam Safety Division did not want a trail built along the spillway.

With approval from the county Planning Board and State Highway Administration, the original project was put on hold, and a connector project behind the neighbors' homes was approved. Members of the Manor Lake Civic Association said they were not notified about the project change until they saw surveying ribbons in January of this year.

The final battle

At the Planning Board meeting, 29 residents addressed the issue.

Those who were opposed to having the trail cited concerns and issues such as pedestrian safety on a bike trail, the detrimental effects of asphalt on the area, fears of increased crime and affecting the natural livelihood of the lake.

"From my understanding, Lake Frank has always been the undisturbed, natural lake and Lake Needwood was the commercial lake where you have the golf course nearby with families having picnics and people fishing and boating," said Stanley Lorek of Lake Terrace Avenue.

On the other side, supporters of the connector trail said other communities besides the Manor Lake Civic Association should be entitled to enjoy and have equal access to the lake.

"Just because they live closer to the lake does not give them the right to dictate what goes onto park property," said Janet Buyer of Sunflower Court in the Flower Valley community.

Buyer said Park and Planning officials had "bent over backwards to do the right thing for not notifying the neighbors" and were "attentive" to the concerns of the neighbors.

In his last appearance as Planning Board chairman, Royce Hanson said he acknowledged the neighbors' concerns in preserving the nature and character of the lake, but that ultimately, the need to expand and build a countywide trail system would provide benefits for a larger representation of people.

"We have a responsibility to be sensitive to the concerns of the community," Hanson said, "but we also have a responsibility to make it feasible for the public to have access and traverse the area, and allow everyone to enjoy Lake Frank and have different kinds of experiences."

Hanson said he had a special interest in Lake Frank. He said he was one of the earlier board members that voted to have the abandoned parking lots closed off to public access, and that his name, along with Commissioner Joe Alfandre's father and others, were listed on a 1974 plaque commemorating the conservation of Lake Frank.

Hanson said the connector trail would allow "fewer incidents of improper use of parks, easier access for park police and more people to report crimes."

Hanson also pointed out there had been public objections made to past trail projects such as the Matthew Henson Trail and Capital Crescent Trail, but those trails now have the support of the surrounding communities.

Hanson told Park and Planning officials he hoped they would include the original environmental project into their Capital Improvements Program.

Joe Fritsch, an Olney resident and a member of the Mid-Atlantic Off Road Enthusiasts (MORE), a mountain biking club in the Washington, D.C., area, said he was satisfied with the decision, but not at the expense of creating tension between neighboring communities.

"I don't like the conflict," Fritsch said. "I was glad to have it done, but the conflict ..." Fritsch sighed and shook his head.

Fritsch said Park and Planning officials chose the trail alignment "that made the most sense."

Park and Planning officials estimate 47 people per hour use the Rock Creek Trail.

Kane said she will continue to follow up with Park and Planning officials to make sure they include the original environmental project into the CIP, and secure funding for that project.

Hanson will be replaced by Francoise Carrier, director of the county's Office of Zoning and Administrative Hearings, who will leave that post to become Planning Board chairwoman June 28.